

THE COMMISSION

— OF —

CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS.

BY THE REV. JAMES C. SMITH, M. A.,
ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, BUCKINGHAM.

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This Discourse was not written intentionally for the Press; neither does the author claim for it any originality or excellence. Certain Members, however, of the Congregation before whom it was delivered, kindly discovered in it some measure of appropriateness to local exigencies, and urgently requested the manuscript with a view to publication. Thinking that the Subject, with all the blemishes of hurried composition, might profit some of his flock, the writer complied with the request.

J. C. S.

The Commission of Christ's Ambassadors.

MATTHEW XXVIII. 19.—“ *Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.*”

It must be matter for sorrowful concern to every true disciple of Jesus to contemplate the jarrings and discord which rend the bosom of the Christian Church at the present day. The simplicity and united character which the Great Founder at first imparted to His blood-bought heritage have been, by permission, sadly disfigured and perverted by Satan. So true to itself is the spirit of the world—and so adverse to the pure element of Divine Truth.

Of the many divisions into which the so-called Christian Church is now separated, some advance the most presumptuous claims to absolute purity of doctrine and to the practice of faultless discipline, others arrogate to themselves the peculiar distinction of being “the Church of God,” while, practically, they exhibit very little that is God-like to substantiate this claim. After all, however, much worldly dissension in the Church is to be deplored; when we think of her noble mission into hostile territory, we are not greatly to wonder. In virtue of her high commission, she has to face the flood of Satanic influence and to stem the boiling torrent of man's unbelief.

As early as the days of Moses, the foundations of the Church of God on earth were laid. A simplicity characteristic of her future history, marks her origin as given in Genesis iv. 26. In the time of our Saviour's humiliation the Church which we behold emerging from darkness and shaking off the trammels of superstition, is but a further development of this early consecrated inheritance, and for her edification, comfort and guidance, it has pleased the only Redeemer of men, to make special appointments, which shall continue in force till the end of time—when, the conflict being over, she shall lay down the weapons of warfare, and wave the palm of victory in the Kingdom of Peace. Then, but not till then, shall we behold in Heaven's unclouded light the true character, the beauty and power of the Church of Christ.

Over this household of faith, so long as it shall continue in the wilderness, certain officers have been unquestionably set apart by God. Whatever difference of opinion may exist as to the functions or authority of these men—no intelligent reader of the Scriptures will, for a moment, deny the fact of their appointment.

The Apostolic Commission forms the subject of ever present inquiry, and may the Spirit of God so guide our deliberations as that we may not lose sight of the Divine Commissioner.

The first point on which the thoughtful mind desires a definite announcement is perhaps, Who are those commissioned ?

I. The officers appointed in the Church.

Let the Scriptures and they alone furnish the reply. All else by whomsoever said, has been said by man, and can have no authority, in any religious concern whatever, over the consciences of men.

The most particular account of this subject is given by Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians IV Chapter and 11th verse, "And he gave some, Apostles; and some, Prophets; and some, Evangelists; and some, Pastors and Teachers." The two first-named have, it is conceded in all hands, long since ceased; the office of Evangelist was created to meet the exigencies of the early Church. Those holding this office were commissioned to advance before the Apostles, as pioneers in the religious world—the only authority with which they seem to have been invested, being to preach the Word. This appointment appears to have been withdrawn at a very early date. There remains, therefore, only one office, viz.: that of Pastors and Teachers. Be it remembered, that St. Paul is here recounting those officers whom Christ gave to His Church when he ascended into Heaven. All other Ecclesiastical offices mentioned in Scripture were constituted afterwards by the Apostles themselves.

If this account be correct, then we are reduced to one class of permanent officers appointed by Christ the great and only head of the Church. It would not be difficult to prove that these Pastors and Teachers are elsewhere spoken of in Scripture as Elders, Bishops and Ministers. But our aim is not to enter the controversial field with Episcopacy, but shall therefore say, in passing, that there is not to be found in the constitution of the Primitive Church the slightest sanction for the Prelatic distinction which some claim as Overseers of the flock of God. On the contrary, "Lordship over God's heritage," is expressly forbidden in the v Chapter of I. Peter.

That which we refuse to one form of Church Government we claim not for another—a divine appointment. As we read the word of God it gives us no specific utterance either on Civil or Ecclesiastical Government, indicating uniformity or permanence, but leaves this subject as a matter of Christian expediency.

By this we would not have you to understand that the Pastors and Teachers in their official connection with the Church were committed to unintelligible confusion and uncertainty as to their procedure. By no means—their province is well defined—their jurisdiction clearly set forth by Him who understands full well the secret springs of the human heart, and knows the innate tendency of all men to anarchy and strife. Their jurisdiction is such as becomes the Author of Peace, and is designed to put an effectual check on the lawlessness of unsanctified ambition, but not to usurp, as a tyrant, dominion over the conscience of any man. It is a juris-

diction best fitted to promote the well being and edification of the body of Christ. Its nature and extent are plainly set forth in the charge originally addressed to the eleven disciples, but equally binding on all Ministers ordained by the Holy Ghost. This charge is given, you will observe, without discrimination and is given "to the end of the world."

This is our only commission as ambassadors of Jesus. This conveys to us the sole authority under which we act, and unless this commission be suspended at some subsequent period of the Church's history—unless it be elsewhere qualified—there is, apparently, no distinction among Christian Ministers—a term which best designates their holy vocation. The Priesthood terminated when the great High Priest offered, once for all, his own body on the tree. Henceforth no man dare come, save as offerer of unhallowed incense, between his fellowman and his God, for we all have, now, free access, by one spirit, unto the Father.

Believing in the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, although not in the Prelatic acceptance, we direct your thoughts to the specific function of the Christian Ministry.

II. The first business, first in point of time and importance, on which the Apostles and afterwards the seventy were sent into the world, was to preach the Gospel. This too was the first active engagement of Christ's public life. To preach, therefore, must still be emphatically the duty of all who are duly consecrated to the office of the ministry till the end of the world. In addition to this, they are charged with the power of administering the sacraments; they are appointed to rule in the Church and to ordain other Ministers. It is well that these things are clearly laid down in Scripture, and not left to conjecture or idle speculation. To avoid misconception on this subject, the Hebrews are directly charged "to remember those who had the rule over them, who spake to them the word of life," and again, "Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls as they that must give account."—Heb. XIII. On Scriptural warrant, therefore, we claim from the household a dutiful respect for the Eldership, and especially for "those who labour in the word and doctrine." And such is our confidence in the divine arrangements, that we firmly believe that this honour shall not be withheld from those who serve Jesus with an uncompromising fidelity. This is not their reward, however; their reward is obtained hereafter.

The true ordination of the Christian Teacher comes from above, yet the Apostles, in their practice, most assuredly meant to convey to future generations a knowledge of that system which was best calculated to edify the infant Church. Otherwise, how shall we explain their frequent allusions to the outward ordination of the overseers of the flock. Was this observance, so plainly taught in Scripture, nothing more than a meaningless ceremony? One object answered by the "laying on of the hands of the Presbytery," was, beyond dispute, to prevent men from unwarrantably assuming the responsibility of the sacred office, to check the pretensions of ignorance and cunning, and to curb the spirit of all fanaticism and extravagance. Notwithstanding all the wisdom and circumspection of extensive

and sanctified learning, the enemy in disguise has nevertheless stolen a march on the guardians of truth, and sometimes obtained a place among the defenders of the faith—has furtively sapped for a season the foundations of the Church and grievously wounded Christ in the house of His friends. This bulwark of the Church's tranquility has been built by God. Here, as well as throughout all the other operations of the Divine Government, prominence is given to the principle of peace and order. This principle we witness in the construction of the natural world—in the revolutions of starry systems—in the mechanism of the human body—in the framework of a mysterious Providence, in the development of his moral kingdom as well as in the economy of grace. Verily, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all churches of the Saints." I. Cor. XIV. 33.

Apart from the authority of Divine appointment, we believe that the moral and intellectual constitution of the human family has been so impaired and shaken by sin, that certain agencies are instinctively recognized as an absolute necessity, upon which should fall the main responsibility under God, of building that spiritual edifice of which Christ is at once the foundation and the corner stone. Human nature has learned, in this matter, to distrust itself.

The commission then which we hold is, beyond comparison, the most glorious—the most honourable, and the most responsible ever entrusted to men, a commission on which the highest archangel would gladly enter—to publish the joyous news of salvation by the blood of Jesus once crucified but now exalted to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins—to tell exiled man of a Paradise regained, for every one that believeth in Jesus. This heavenly message hath already burst through the restraints of territorial confinement, and it claims, in prospective conquest, the utmost bounds of a lost and ruined world. However feeble or inadequate to this God-like enterprise, the ministry of the word may appear in the eyes of men, as we contemplate the principle of its divine origin we confidently look onward to a grand and glorious issue. The vessels to which this treasure has been committed are indeed earthen vessels—yet the impress of divinity elevates them far above human influence—far above human resources—far above diabolic power. It has been well said—"The ministry is clothed in its own majesty—it travels in its own strength—it is independent alike of friends and foes. On this truth rest its success and stability. On it the seal of eighteen centuries has been already fixed, and, in the nineteenth century, amid tempests which have shaken empires to the dust, and assaults directed against its divinity, its position is alike commanding and impregnable." Despite the rancorous spirit which first unveiled itself in the days of the Apostles, and which ever since has poured forth its venom against the foolishness of preaching the doctrines of the Cross—despite the senseless clamours of these latter days. I appeal to the past and ask the result of the conflict when "the battle was fought in blood even to the horses' bridles." The weakness of God has been proved to be stronger than men. I ask for the enemies of the ministry of the word, and

I am shewn their dishonoured graves. I ask for its friends, and lo, yonder, around the Throne, I behold a multitude with white robes, and bearing palms in their hands. I ask for the mighty leader of this invincible host, and I am answered by a universal shout from heaven and earth, "Blessing and honour and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth on the Throne and to the Lord for ever and ever."

III. In the text, Christ instructs His followers to make disciples of all nations, and to "baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." What was the duty of the Apostles in this case, is equally the duty of all succeeding Ministers.

Water baptism had its origin in the Jewish Church. The earliest reference made in the Old Testament to this ceremony may be found in Numbers XIX. 19-20. No Jew who had lived as a Gentile even for a single day, could be restored to the Church without undergoing the appointed purification by water. Now when Jesus came into the world, He did not seek to allure men into His Kingdom by the charm of novelty or the multiplicity of forms, but He adapted to the new economy, so far as practicable, those already established. Hence the institution of the New Testament Sacrament of Baptism by water. Moses intimates that the children of Israelitish parents would ask respecting the Passover, "What mean ye by this ordinance?" and they were instructed to explain to them the marvellous mercy which it commemorated. A similar explanation respecting Baptism is equally necessary at the present day, not only for the sake of the young, but for others who have grown up sadly ignorant of its nature and design. In many cases, we fear, the best reason urged in favour of infant baptism is the use and wont of by-gone days. Surely the doctrine rests on a more substantial basis. That it does so, we shall endeavour to prove.

Since our Saviour has plainly restricted the administration of this ordinance to those who are lawfully ordained to instruct men in the doctrines of His religion, we shall not stop to argue a point in which He hath left no room for conjecture.

First, then, the intention of this ordinance is unquestionably to present to us the cleansing of the soul by the blood of Christ, and also the effusion of the Divine Spirit. Proof of this you will find in Isaiah XLIV. and 3, and Ezekiel xxxvi, and 25-27.

None here, I presume, hold the dishonouring view that Baptism is a saving ordinance. We shall not therefore enlarge on Baptismal regeneration, but hasten to the enquiry, Who are the proper subjects of Baptism? We reply, all who believe in Christ and who publicly profess their faith in Him. Not only they, but likewise the infant children of believing parents, have a right to the seal of the Covenant. A certain class of Christians whose communion hath embraced many noble examples of distinguished piety, of extensive literary acquirements and of unquestionable zeal, sublime enterprise and self-denial, dispute the validity of Infant Baptism and are in consequence designated antipædo-Baptists. With these our Brethren, we have no disposition to open up a question, which, perhaps more than

all others, has already wrought incalculable mischief in the visible Church. Our desire is simply to show that we are not without Scriptural warrant for the practice which prevails among ourselves, a practice by which we and our children have been initiated into the bosom of the Christian Church.

It is a significant fact, that, during the old Testament dispensation, every Covenant into which God entered with man, invariably embraced the little ones. Take for example, the rite of Circumcision, styled in the New Testament, a "seal of the righteousness of faith." In his Epistle to the Galatians, v. 2, 3, III. 27, St. Paul represents Baptism as coming in the place of Circumcision. If the latter did not exclude children from its privileges, neither should the former.

It may be said, "There is no certain example of infant baptism in the Scriptures." True, but there are instances in which, according to every rule of rational construction, this is plainly involved. Lydia and her house, the household of Stephenas, and the house of the Philippian Jailor, were all baptized; and, is it for a moment to be believed that no little ones cheered the domestic hearths of their households? The concession now granted, if it be regarded as one of our weakest points, must draw from Immersionists themselves a corresponding admission, viz: that the New Testament furnishes no instance of adult baptism—the subject being the offspring of believing parents. Neither of the two sides is therefore a gainer in this particular—the one concession balances the other exactly. Christ's taking up little children in his arms and blessing them is an incident, however, well worthy of our observation. These children were doubtless the offspring of believing Jews. And it is only the offspring of believers that we regard as having a right to the seal of the covenant of grace. "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven," or, in other words, these form a large proportion of the Membership of the visible Church, is the testimony of Jesus Himself. Had it been unlawful to baptize children, their exclusion from the Covenant would have been unmistakably intimated in Scripture. No direction as to the reception of Infants was needed by the disciples. This had been once appointed, and it has never since been repealed. Besides appealing to personal observation, have you not known some children give from their earliest years, evident tokens of participation in grace? If so, why deny them the outward sign of an inward gift? Against the exclusion of children, the natural feelings instinctively rise in rebellion—and the verdict of reason is proclaimed in defence of their privilege.

They cannot exercise faith, it is true, but the objection falls with equal weight on the institution of Circumcision, and impugns infinite wisdom. Our opponents tell us that Christ set an example of adult-baptism. Now surely they cannot be ignorant of the fact; that Christ's baptism at the river Jordan was performed prior to the institution of Christian Baptism—and, as He came "to fulfil all righteousness," He submitted to this ordinance in honor to John's Ministry.

A few words now regarding the mode of applying the water to the subject—and we shall not unwillingly leave the matter in the hands of Com-

mon sense and Christian intelligence. We frankly admit that, in the early Church; three distinct practices prevailed, viz; Sprinkling, pouring, and immersion in a state of nudity. But, as it would be utterly impossible within the limits of a single discourse to examine critically the several passages behind which the advocates of immersion have entrenched themselves as in a position called by them unassailable, we shall merely pass two or three under a hasty review. And put 1 Corinthians (X 1. 2.) "Moreover Brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, know that all our fathers were under the cloud and all passed through the Sea. And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the Sea." This passage is quoted, remember, in support of immersion. But an exact account of the transaction referred to by Paul, may be found in Exodus, XIII. 21. 22. and XIV. 20-22. In the whole account thus given by Moses, not even an allusion is made to Baptism—The Israelites were not sprinkled by the waters of the Red Sea, and it is not said that—"they were baptized in the Cloud." But what Moses has omitted, the Prophet Asaph has particularly recorded in Psalm LXXVII. 16-20. "The waters saw Thee O God; the waters saw thee; they were afraid; the depths were also troubled; the clouds poured out water, the skies sent out a sound." From this we infer that, when the cloud passed from the van of the Israelites to the rear, the rain may have descended on the passengers through the channel of the Red Sea. This is the only account of the baptism mentioned by St. Paul, which is found in the Old Testament. It seems to countenance sprinkling, certainly not immersion.

Again, we are directed, in condemnation of our practice, to Matthew III, 11th. The bare rendering of this passage to suit the views of our antagonists—thus: "I will plunge you in the Holy Ghost and in fire," should, we think, be a sufficient exposition of the absurdity. As to the mode in which this baptism was accomplished, both prophecy and history give their distinct testimony. Saith the Prophet Joel, II, 28-29: "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh," &c., which prediction was fulfilled, according to Peter's declaration, on the day of Pentecost—Acts II, 1-5, 33. Since effusion of the Holy Ghost is here acknowledged as spiritual baptism, this circumstance is, in our opinion, a distinct proof that effusion of water, or sprinkling, is, in the view of the New Testament writers, baptism also. That immersion is not essential to the proper administration of the sacrament of Baptism, we have unequivocal proof in John XIII, where Jesus is inculcating on Peter the duty of humility and the doctrine of the efficacy of his own blood, and of the necessity of the Spirit's sanctifying and cleansing power. Misapprehending the design of our Savior's proposal to "wash his feet," Peter, with characteristic ardor, recoils from this supposed indignity to his master. Having obtained a glimpse of the spiritual import of the act—the impulsive disciple exclaims, "Lord not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." But as a symbolical washing is perfect, although applied only to a part of the body, Jesus replies, "He that is washed, needeth not save to wash his feet; but is clean every whit." It is plainly taught therefore in this passage, that immersion is not essential.

